



The "father of experimental television," Nam June Paik.

Experimental TV:

by Frederick A. Jacobi

If you should happen to be watching Channel 17 on an early autumn evening and you suddenly see a tap-dancer's legs subdivide, turn upside down and wiggle like limp spaghetti made from Silly Putty, please don't telephone your TV repair man or your psychiatrist. What you will have stumbled across is an experimental program called "GLOBAL GROOVE," and it's supposed to look like that.

"GLOBAL GROOVE" is the creation of an antic genius named Nam June Paik, a Korean-born musician-teacher-technician who is generally credited with being the father of experimental television. He is one of the artists in residence at WNET's Television Laboratory, which is supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts. His work is included in a series of avant-garde programs — produced at experimental centers in New York, Boston and San Francisco — scheduled for weekly broadcast during August and September.

Paik is the co-inventor of the Paik-Abe video-synthesizer, a hunk of sophisticated electronic hardware capable of making Salvador Dali's wildest dreams come true. He is also the co-inventor of Charlotte Moorman, an attractive young woman who is to cellists what a streaker is to marathon runners and who sometimes substitutes piles of TV receivers — or even Paik's back — for her cello. She appears (fully clothed, alas) in "GLOBAL GROOVE," along with a Korean fan dancer, a Navajo Indian drummer, three small Japanese children singing the praises of Pepsi-Cola, Allen Ginsberg reciting what sound like Oriental belches, John Cage describing the noise his nervous system makes and a melting nude woman electronically superimposed over a fleeting glimpse of President Nixon.

If all of this sounds like sheer madness, you should know that there is a method to it. Paik believes that TV, a visual medium that need not be bound by language barriers, has global potential which is seldom

realized. Indeed, he envisions a kind of video common market and looks forward to the day when "TV Guide will be as fat as the telephone directory."

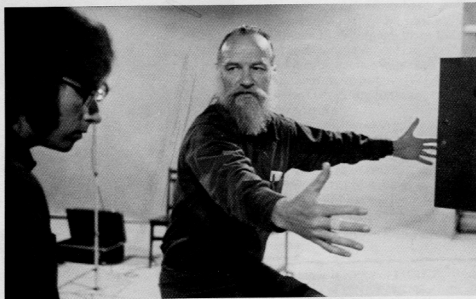
The serious purpose underlying this electronic surrealism is rooted in the fact that the Television Laboratory has been established primarily to explore and demonstrate the potential of TV as an art form in its own right. While there are important by-products, Howard Klein, director of the arts program at the Rockefeller Foundation, likens the relationship between the video artist and his hardware to that between Ingres and the graphite pencil, in 1789 a new invention which he put to good use.

Moving Wallpaper or Pure Art?

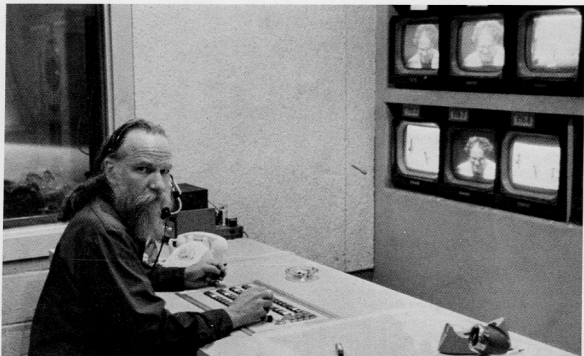
Klein believes that a foundation is justified in supporting artistic creativity for the same reason that it supports pure scientific research: an unknown benefit to mankind may result.

Artists in residence at the Television Laboratory have included such distinguished independent filmmakers as Ed Emshwiller and Stan Vanderbeek. Individual works — some of which will be exhibited in this fall's broadcast series — have been supported by supplementary grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Stern Fund, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and other agencies. Emshwiller, a painter before he moved first into film and later into video, treats the video-synthesizer like an electronic paint brush.

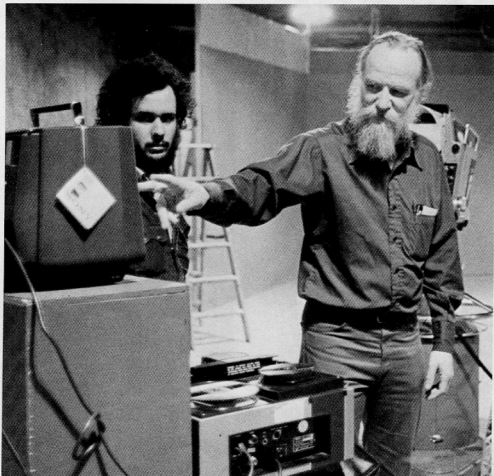
"I am an image maker," he says. "I was attracted to the possibility of image transformation and manipulation that was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve on film." Emshwiller's critically



Filmmaker Ed Emshwiller explains one of his video projects to Channel 17's Dave Cady. Emshwiller is featured on VIDEO VISIONARIES, seen Wednesday nights at 10:30.



Ed Emshwiller: "I am now capable of transforming and combining images I have in my head but could never create before."



Emshwiller and Tony Bannon (left) preview an experimental project they co-produced.

acclaimed "Scape Mates" introduces two dancers into a computer landscape.

Pure research can achieve utilitarian results. One important by-product of this kind of experimentation has been a refinement of the technology which enhances the effectiveness of TV as a communications medium. Both Klein and David Loxton, the ebullient director of the Laboratory, are excited about the potential of the porta-pak, an extraordinarily lightweight portable TV camera and recording unit which has already been employed to good advantage by a young San Francisco-based producing group called Top Value Television (TDTV).

"The Lord of the Universe," a warts-and-all documentary about the recent Houston convocation of the followers of the teenaged guru Maharaj Ji (shown earlier this year on Channel 17), was a collaboration between TDTV and the Laboratory. WNET engineers successfully translated the porta-pak's electronically unstable half-inch videotape signal into the precise requirements of broadcast TV through the use of a little black box known as a time-base corrector.

With the porta-pak a cameraman can act as reporter and sound man. Klein hails this as "the new journalism. TDTV has already realized the potential of the medium as journalism by eliminating the writer and the commentator. The equipment is so unobtrusive that people being interviewed tend not to feel threatened by it and therefore display a greater level of candor."

And Loxton believes that this kind of video *vérité* — in which the cameraman/reporter often actively participates in the scene — will ultimately replace *cinéma vérité*, which he calls "a false aesthetic. It is nonsense to assume that filmmakers are recording 'truth': people react differently when they know they're being filmed." Besides, he says, a finished porta-pak production costs about a quarter as

much as does a filmed program of the same length.

Another Laboratory by-product is research into the physiological effects of television on the watcher. The Rockefeller Foundation is headed by a physician, Dr. John H. Knowles, who is understandably interested in medical fall-out. The Lab accordingly commissioned Dr. Julian Hochberg, chairman of the psychology department at Columbia University, to begin an intensive investigation into the medium as a unique mode of visual stimulation.

With the help of TV artists stretching techniques to their outer limits, Dr. Hochberg has produced what appears to be a pioneering paper on the effects of TV on perception: "The Perception of Television Displays," a 60-page survey and analysis of more than 275 individual research experiments, is the first known attempt to collect and analyze this material. Important conclusions have already been drawn about flicker rate, concentration, hypnosis, fatigue and how much information you can cram into a microsecond.

Significant though they may be, these practical applications are of secondary importance to the Rockefeller Foundation, which has been supporting pure research in television since 1967, when it established the National Center for Experiments in Television at San Francisco's pioneering public TV station KQED. From the start the Center's orientation has been academic rather than pragmatic. Its director, Paul Kaufman, is interested in relaying conceptual ideas through imagery — values, ethics, other concepts which are locked into literature. Ironically, two of the Center's recent electronic "compositions" — they are far too abstract to be called programs and are sometimes described as "moving wallpaper" — have won Emmy awards and will also be broadcast this fall.

Experimentation at WGBH, Boston, on the other hand, has been specifically geared to broadcasting.

The station's New Television Workshop, directed by the inventive Fred Barzyk, is now searching for new formats for familiar subjects and will encourage individuals to develop new broadcast techniques. It should be noted that Nam June Paik refined some of his technological razzle-dazzle at WGBH.

WNET's Loxton notes that Frank Lloyd Wright once described television as "chewing gum for the eye balls." Loxton believes that the medium can overcome this epithet only by the creative imaginations of individuals working in an environment free of the strictures and time limitations of daily broadcasting.

In the coming year, Loxton plans to specialize in a few major broadcast works. He will encourage the Laboratory's artists in residence to collaborate with each other in various projects involving the dance, dramatic narrative, music, the new journalism and the total process of communication.

"Up to now our artists have worked individually," he says. "We would like to encourage them to try collaboration as a mix of creative inputs, to stretch not only their own potential, but the potential of the year, the Laboratory has a special medium as well."

For one artist working alone this past year, the Laboratory has a special significance: "I am now capable of transforming and combining images I have in my head but could never create before," says Ed Emshwiller. "This is a new experience for me and hopefully for others."

The author is editor of IMAGE, the magazine of WNET/13 New York. Copyright © Educational Broadcasting Corporation 1974.